

Does Bill Slaughter deserve an apology?

I'd like to take this opportunity to — *cough, cough, sputter, sputter, wheeze* — apologize to Bill Slaughter.

Um, sorry.

Sort of.

The lawyer who pulled so many strings at Jefferson County for so many years may have been a pompous, long-winded, overpaid pain in our debt-burdened derrières. But he was *our* pompous, long-winded, overpaid pain.

Slaughter was Jefferson County's legal go-to-guy. He was the one who put all the shadowy plans together, whose firm hauled in millions of dollars from previous commissions. Whenever his \$425-an-hour bills were questioned, loyal commissioners defended him, saying:

He knew best.

He knew the county best.

And he had been paid so much that it would be bad business to simply abandon that investment.

And they continued to say it, even as the county tipped into a legal and financial abyss.

Slaughter became Public Enemy No. 1 in this town, for a moment in 2008, when he unveiled "The Bill Slaughter Plan." That idea, which people rightly hated almost as much as they should have hated it, would have automatically increased property and sales tax rates any time Jefferson County couldn't pull in enough money to pay its bills.

A blank check for Jefferson County. It gives me shivers just thinking about it.

So that — clearly — is not what this apology is about. The apology comes because now, with the rear view of time, it is clear that we have not learned a darned thing from the Slaughters of the world or from our past.

We are downright eager to repeat it, eager to trust and pay and pray for a better outcome.



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And from that view, Slaughter is both cheaper and more forthcoming than the puppet masters of today.

Cough, cough. Sputter.

What has changed, after all, but the amounts?

The Jefferson County Commission acknowledged this week that sewer rates must rise. And of course they do. Any idiot could see that coming. The problem is that this commission has pretended rates would not rise substantially, it has assured

that whatever came would be ... gentle.

Ouch.

In the, um, end, we got what we were gonna get all along. Double-digit rate increases for typical residents. And the same buck-passing we heard so often before.

"We got experts and attorneys, we are paying them big money and we need to take their recommendation that will get us out of bankruptcy," Commissioner Sandra Little Brown said on behalf of the rate increase. "We need to take their recommendation to move Jefferson County forward."

What has changed but the money?

The county — the people of this county — has been paying a whole militia of lawyers more than \$15 million — \$2 million a month in some months — to carve this county a great deal. It took Slaughter a decade to earn what these bankruptcy lawyers make in a year.

And in the end, sewer rates will rise by double digits, Lord knows how often. In the end our current commissioners believe, as their predecessors did, that their lawyers would negotiate the best possible deal. Because they ...

Know best.

And know the county best.

And had been paid too much to ignore now.

We have paid a lot to circle back to the place we used to be. For it looks more and more like the deal Jefferson County is now walking into is a lot like the deal it walked away from before filing bankruptcy. That deal would have cut at least a billion dollars in debt, allowed the county to avoid the stigma of bankruptcy, and put it on a trajectory to recovery.

Just like this.

Only these days we just pay more. And do it with more secrecy.

John Archibald's column appears Sundays, Wednesdays and Fridays in the Birmingham News and on AL.com. Email him at jar-chibald@al.com.